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ABSTRACT

Because many college communication departments employ graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) to provide instruction in undergraduate courses, a study was conducted to determine how much inservice training departments provide their GTAs to prepare them for effective teaching. A questionnaire was completed by 136 speech communication departments across the United States with 15 items designed to elicit information on the nature of their graduate teaching assistant program and on the depth and content of their GTA training. The results of the survey indicated that GTAs were assigned to classes based on the enrollment needs of the courses and taught hundreds of students each term, primarily in a lecture/recitation format. Although the GTAs assumed a great deal of responsiblity in planning their teaching activities, the training they received consisted mostly of staff meetings and course orientations, which would be adequate for those GTAs with several years of teaching experience. However, as shown by the survey, the majority of GTAs had less than one year's teaching experience. Most GTAs received feedback from the faculty and students, but nearly one-fourth were not observed by the faculty in the classroom, and one-third were never given feedback from the faculty in appraisal interviews. The study concluded that it is the departments' responsibility to improve their training of GTAs. (HTH)

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A Survey of In-Service Teacher Training Programs for Graduate Teaching Assistants in Basic Communication Courses

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Many communication departments employ Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) to provide instruction in their undergraduate courses. Teaching assistantship programs offer valuable services both to the departments and to the graduate students. The department is able to provide instruction to a large number of undergraduate students at a cost far below that which would be needed if full time faculty were used to teach the same courses. On the other hand, graduate students gain valuable teaching experience, as well as financial help in meeting the costs of a graduate education. The mutual benefits of a graduate teaching assistantship program are generally accepted by both the department and the graduate student.

Unfortunately, the concommitant responsibility for providing effective training for the GTA is less generally accepted by communication departments. DeBoer (1979) states that, "many graduate teaching assistants have had neither formal training nor practical teaching experience prior to their enrollment in graduate school. Orientation and training programs for teaching assistants are generally considered departmental responsibilities (p. 328)." Yet many departments do not accept or meet this responsibility. Staton-Spicer & Nyquist (1979) conclude that, "While most graduate programs have been effective in training students to do scholarly research work, limited attention has been given to their needs in gaining teaching proficiency (p. 200)." Similar conclusions were drawn by Kaufman-Everett & Backlund (1980),

Bassett & Browning (1978), La Ban (1977), and Bassett & Jeffrey (1975). The lack of adequate training for GTAs seems a consistent problem which communication departments must recognize and solve.

Effective teaching by GTAs is necessary for the well-being of the communication department. At a time when undergraduate enrollments are declining, the basic courses typically taught by GTAs provide the necessary numbers to keep communication department budgets at adequate levels. Further, undergraduate students often receive their first introduction to the communication discipline through the fundamental "bread and butter" courses taught by the GTAs. (Staton-Spicer & Nyquist, 1979; Bassett & Browning, 1978). The GTAs, therefore, are an integral part of communication departments' efforts to attract undergraduate students and majors. However, as Kaufman-Everett & Backlund (1980) conclude, "Many of the teaching assistants have never taught before and lack the knowledge and experience to prepare for these (basic communication) courses (p. 47)." Both undergraduate enrollment in service courses and recruitment of communication majors seem predicated on the efficacy of the GTAs in the classroom situation.

The departments also have a responsibility to provide the graduate student with teaching skills that will help prepare him/her for future careers in academic positions. Many departments focus primarily on the training of graduate students

to conduct research and or to be successful in business and public careers. Few departments seem to take the responsibility to prepare graduate students to be successful in the college or university environment. Arnold (1976) emphasizes the importance of teacher training as part of a graduate students' education, "Many university officials are being required to demonstrate that their faculty are, in fact, providing quality teaching for students. New faculty are required to demonstrate that they are good teachers in order to be retained, given tenure, and promoted.(p. 42)." Teaching skills are also necessary in other non-academic position whenever the goal is to help people "acquire knowledge, attitudes, and/or skills to enhance their effectiveness as participants in communication (Bassett, 1979, p. 10)." The GTA should feel cheated if he/she does not receive teacher training as an integral part of the graduate school experience. In most faculty positions, research skills are not enough to ensure job security and advancement--but in most graduate schools, research skills are all that are taught.

An effective training program for GTAs requires a commitment on the part of the communication department to provide resources and effort for an in-service teacher education program. Bassett & Browning (1978) suggest that an effective teacher training program should include: 1) preparation prior to the actual teaching experience; 2) identifying and correcting problems during the

the teaching experience; and 3) providing effective feedback through summary evaluations at the end of the teaching experience. Ferguson & Miller (1979) suggest that direct observation of other teachers can be an effective method of providing feedback on teaching effectiveness. Booth & Nyquist (1976) outline a course for teaching "Communication in the Educational Environment." Departmental administrators should also consider the goodness of fit between the GTA's expertise and interests and the nature of the course the GTA is assigned to teach. The goodness of fit would include factors such as course format, past experience, number of students in the class, and the nature and scope of the GTA's educational background. The issues and problems outlined in this discussion are not necessarily new, but they are essential for an adequate graduate student teacher training program.

Despite the admitted importance of the GTA in conducting undergraduate communication classes, and despite the attention of communication scholars and educators to the problem of GTA training, little research has been conducted to ascertain the exact nature of the GTA teaching assignment or the adequacy of the training received by the GTA. Kaufman-Everett & Backlund (1980) concluded from their review of literature that "Despite interest in this problem, and despite recent interest in course and teacher evaluations, little has been done to

investigate how speech communication departments prepare their graduate students to teach the basic communication course (p. 47)." Therefore, this study was conducted to determine the national trends in the nature of GTA assignments, the characteristics of the GTAs, and the type of training and evaluation provided for GTAs.

Procedure

A questionnaire was mailed to the chairpersons of 160 speech communication departments throughout the country in December, 1979 and January, 1980. The departments were selected from the Directory of Graduate Programs in the Communication Arts and Sciences--1979-1980. Only departments with programs emphasizing rhetoric, public address, communication theory, and/or mass communication and which employed GTAs were included in the sample.

The study achieved a return rate of 136 (85.0%) responses. Five of the returned questionnaires were deleted from the analysis because of incomplete data or because the department did not employ GTAs. While the questionnaire was mailed to the Department Chairperson, it was often clear from the comments or from the signature (optional) of the respondent that the person most likely to know the information had completed the questionnaire, e.g., basic course directors or graduate studies directors. Additionally, many of the questionnaires included supplementary comments or materials which the respondents felt would clarify a response or which would provide more information

about their program. The nature of this information indicates that time and effort were given to answering the questions, that the respondants were qualified and knowledgeable about the information required by the questionnaire, and that the respondants were conscientious in completing the survey instrument. This evidence suggests that the survey obtained a high degree of validity.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of fifteen forced-choice items designed to elicit information on the nature of the graduate teaching assistant program and on the depth and content of the GTA training. Question content was derived from the issues found in the review of literature regarding proposed GTA training programs (e.g., Staton-Spicer & Nyquist, 1979; DeBoer, 1979; Bassett & Browning, 1978). The questions asked the respondants to indicate department size (number of GTAs, number of faculty, number of graduate students), class size (number of undergraduates taught by the GTAs), amount of responsibility GTAs were given in conducting their classes, the teaching format, types and content of GTA training programs, GTA salaries, amount of the GTAs' prior teaching experience, the criteria for assigning GTAs to classes, and the types of evaluations of GTA teaching used by the departments. Respondants were also encouraged to provide additional information not covered by the forced choice questions. All respondants were assured that their answers would remain confidential.

Results

One objective of the survey was to determine the extent of the GTA contribution to speech communication departments' undergraduate teaching responsibilities. The survey asked the departments to indicate, "How many graduate students in your department have teaching responsibility?" The average number of GTAs per department was 13 with a standard deviation of 13.1. The number of GTAs per department ranged from 1 to 65. (Table I summarizes these data in a condensed format). To ascertain the number of undergraduate students taught by the GTAs, the survey asked, "How many undergraduate students per term (approximately) are enrolled in classes taught by GTAs?" The average number of students taught by GTAs per department was 498 students per term, with a standard deviation of 587.2 and a range of 15 to 3200 students. (See Table II for a condensed summary of these data). By dividing the total number of undergraduate students by the number of GTAs in the department, the average class load of the GTA per department was calculated. The average class load was 39 students, with a standard deviation of 31.4, and a range of 1 to 250 students per GTA per term. (See Table III for a summary of these data). These results indicate that the GTA performs an important role in the teaching of undergraduate students. Therefore, a large number of undergraduate students depend on the GTA for their introduction and education in the communication discipline.

A second objective of the study was to determine the nature of the GTA teaching assignment. Three related questions were included in the questionnaire in order to ascertain the manner in which GTAs were assigned to the class, the teaching format used by the GTAs, and the amount of responsibility given to the GTA in conducting the class.

First, the questionnaire asked the respondant to indicate, "What is the most important consideration in your department's decisions concerning course teaching assignments for your GTAs?" Six alternative responses were listed: course enrollment needs; GTA's past teaching experience; GTA's seniority in the department; GTA's major content area of study; GTA's academic level; other. The most frequent response (40%) was that course enrollment was the most important criteria in deciding what course the GTA would teach. The second most frequent response (19.2%) was the GTA's major content area of study. Seniority (0%), past teaching experience (10.0%), and academic level (3.1%) did not seem to be important in making the teaching assignment for most departments. (Table IV summarizes the responses to this question).

Second, the departments were asked to indicate, "What Percent (approximately) of your GTA's teach in each of the following formats: large lecture only; lecture/recitation(lab); recitation only; other. (Table V summarizes the responses to this question). Most departments seemed to use the lecture/ recitation format for the majority of their GTAs, with 53.4% of the schools indicating that three-fourths or more of their GTAs were in the lecture/recitation format. An additional

18.3% of the departments placed three-fourths or more of their GTAs in a recitation-only teaching format. The data indicate that most GTAs are teaching small sections (recitation) of undergraduates either by themselves or in conjunction with a large lecture.

Third, the study tried to determine the amount of responsibility given to the GTAs for the daily teaching of their classes. The respondants were asked to indicate, "What percentage (approximately) of your GTAs have the following amounts of responsibility in planning their daily teaching activities: none; some; majority; or total responsibility. (Table VI summarizes the responses to this question). The majority of departments (56%) indicated that they gave three-fourths or more of their GTAs some or a majority of responsibility for the planning of their daily teaching activities. In addition, 11% of the departments indicated that three-fourths or more of their GTAs have total responsibility for their classes.

Overall, the results indicate that the GTAs are assigned to classes based on the enrollment needs of the courses, are teaching primarily in a lecture/recitation format, and are given at least some responsibility in planning their teaching activities. Congruent with these findings, and the finding that the GTAs teach a large number of undergraduate students each term, one would expect that the GTAs are given adequate amounts of training and evaluations.

A third objective of the survey was to ascertain the types of training and evaluation received by GTAs in speech communication departments. The departments were asked to indicate "Which types of in-service teacher training do you offer to your GTAs (either required or optional): a general course orientation; departmental course(s) in teaching methods/theory; courses in teaching methods/theory offered by other departments; staff meetings; other. (Table VII summarizes the responses for this question). The most often used method of training GTAs was the general course orientation (93.9%) followed by staff meetings (87.4%). Approximately half of the departments (51.4%) offered a departmental course on teaching methods/theory, while only 28.2% of the departments included another department's course as either an optional or required part of the GTA training.

An essential part of GTA training would seem to be the types and amount of feedback the GTAs receive on their teaching effectiveness. Therefore, this questionnaire asked the departments to indicate, "Which methods of teacher evaluation do your department currently use to evaluate your GTAs?" Three general sources of feedback and evaluation were included in the choices: students' evaluation; faculty evalution; and self or peer evaluation. The results (see Table VIII) indicate that most departments use a combination of student and faculty evaluation procedures. Almost half of the departments use either a college standardized rating form (49.6%) or a departmental

standardized rating form (48.1%). The most common forms of faculty evaluation are class visitations (74%) and faculty reviews of the student evaluation forms (80.9%). Approximately two-thirds of the departments (66.4%) also talk to the GTAs about their teaching effectiveness. Few departments seem to use self evaluations (34.4%) or peer evaluations (12.2%). Most GTAs seem to receive a good deal of feedback from the undergraduate students as well as feedback from the faculty on their teaching effectiveness. Note, however, that almost one-fourth of the GTAs (26.0% of the GTAs) are not observed by the faculty in the classroom setting, and one third (33.6%) of the GTAs are not given feedback from the faculty in appraisal interviews.

The GTAs are given a large amount of responsibility in conducting classes for hundreds of undergraduates each term. The training they receive, however, seems to consist mostly of staff meetings and course orientations. This type of teaching situation would be expected for teachers with several years experience but does not seem adequate for beginning teachers. In order to determine the amount of experience the GTAs have, the departments were asked to respond to the question, "What percent (approximately) of your GTAs have had prior teaching experience equalling: no prior experience; less than one year; 1 to 2 years; 2 to 3 years; 3 to 4 years; 4 to 5 years; 5 or more years. (The results for this question are summarized in Table IX).

More than half (51.9%) of the departments reported that a majority of their GTAs have less than one year's teaching experience. Indeed, 39.7% of the departments reported that over half of their GTAs have no prior teaching experience at all. The responses to this question seem to indicate that most GTAs are inexperienced in teaching communication courses.

While teaching assignments are not ususally based on academic rank or years of teaching experience, it is interesting to note that the salaries for GTAs differ between MA level and Ph.D. level graduate students.(see Table X). The average GTA salary for MA's is between $3101 and $3400, while the average GTA salary for PH.D.'s is between $3701 and $4000. Indeed, almost half of the Ph.D.'s (46.6%) make over $4000, while only 16.7% of the MA's make over $4000.

In summary, the results of this survey indicate that GTAs come to the teaching situation with little or no previous teaching experience. They are assigned to classes based primarily on the enrollment needs of the classes, and tend to teach a large number of graduate students each term. The GTAs are given a good deal of responsibility for their classes and often teach in a lecture/recitation or recitation only format. GTAs receive teacher training primarily through course orientations and staff meetings and receive feedback on their teaching effectiveness from both undergraduate and faculty evaluations. No significant differences in these results were found when the data was compared by department size, number of faculty, school conference, degrees offered, or the number of GTAs employed.

Discussion

Scholars and educators have expressed concern about the effectiveness of GTAs in teaching the basic speech communication course for the past decade (Phelps, 1969). Journal articles, convention programs, and basic course directors' conferences have devoted attention to discussion of the problem and the proposal of GTA teacher training programs. A survey by Kaufman-Everett & Backlund (1980) made an initial step in ascertaining the nature of GTA teacher training programs across the country. This survey attempted to update the findings of their 1979 survey, and to examine in more detail the nature of the GTA teaching assignment and the types of training received by the GTAs in speech communication departments.

The survey results indicate some important characteristics of the communication departments' use and training of GTAs. Most notably are the large numbers of undergraduate students taught by GTAs every year. While the GTA assignment is often given to the graduate student as a form of financial aid, the undergraduate students taught by the GTA expect--and deserve--quality instruction. In other words, communication departments owe it to the undergraduate students enrolled in the basic course to provide the GTAs with effective training programs to ensure quality teaching in the department's courses.

Unfortunately, many of the GTAs begin their teaching assignments with little or no experience. Yet they are assigned to teach in lecture/recitation or recitation-only formats where they are give a good deal of responsibility for planning their

daily teaching activities. Yet, the GTAs are given little training besides course orientations and staff meetings. Relatively few departments offer either a required or optional course in teaching methods/theory. It seems reasonable that if GTAs are expected to provide quality instruction in the basic course, and if they do not have teaching experience prior to graduate school, the communication department must take the responsibility to provide in-service teacher training.

A fairly common assumption of communication departments--and college teaching in general--is that if the teacher knows the subject matter, then he/she will be able to communicate that material to the students. Interestingly, only about one-fifth of the GTA's are assigned to courses primarily on the basis of their content area of study. GTA knowledge of the content area seems to be a secondary criteria for course assignments. In virtually no other job would a person be expected to perform well without training. Teachers of elementary and secondary school students must complete a thorough sequence of courses in educational methods and theory before they are licensed to teach. Yet GTAs seem to be assigned to classes with no experience and little training.

GTAs are given evaluations of their effectiveness through student feedback and faculty evaluations. Almost all GTAs receive some form of student evaluation and three-fourths of the GTAs

are observed by faculty in the classroom situation. Still, one-fourth of the GTAs are not observed in the classroom and must rely almost entirely on student feedback at the end of the term. Thus, GTA teacher training seems to rely heavily on trial and error. Few departments report using any type of self-evaluation by the GTA or peer evaluation by other GTAs for feedback on the GTA's effectiveness in the classroom. Ferguson & Miller (1979) argue that college faculty can benefit significantly from peer observation and feedback. GTA use of peer observation and evaluation may be equally viable as a method of helping GTAs become more effective teachers.

This survey tried to identify the current practices in the employment of GTAs to teach the basic course. The department receives the benefit of teaching large enrollments of undergraduate students in their service courses at relatively low cost-per-student ratios. However, for the GTA to be a viable part of the departments' academic program, the departments must ensure that they are placing quality instructors in the classrooms. In order for GTAs to become effective teachers they must be given adequate training--more than merely orientation to the course and staff meetings. The departments must be willing to invest time, personnel, and materials in a training program that will give the GTA the resources and skills to be effective not only in the immediate GTA position, but also in future academic careers. Communication departments must not only train the GTA in the content and the research methods, but also in the skills necessary to teach the college level class. To do anything less is an injustice to the GTA--and a disservice to the department.

TABLE I

Number of GTAs per Department

Number of GTAs	No. of Depts.	Percent
0 - 5	39	29.8%
6 - 10	33	25.2%
11 - 15	19	14.5%
15 - 20	13	9.9%
21 or over	27	20.6%
total	131	100.0%

$\bar{x}$ = 13 S.D. = 13.1 Range = 1 to 65

TABLE II

Number of Students Taught by GTAs per Term

Number of Students Taught per Term	No. of Depts	Percent
0 - 50	12	9.2
51 - 150	16	12.2
151 - 250	25	19.1
251 - 450	21	16.0
451 - 650	13	9.9
651 - 850	11	8.4
851 or more	33	25.2
total	131	100.0

$\bar{x}$ = 498 S.D. = 587.2 Range = 15 to 3200

TABLE III

Number of Students per GTA per Term

Number of Students per GTA per Term	No. of Depts.	Percent
0 - 20	32	24.4%
21 - 30	26	19.9%
31 - 40	23	17.5%
41 - 50	20	15.3%
51 - 75	24	18.3%
76 or more	6	4.6%
total	131	100.0%

$\bar{x}$ = 39 S.D. = 31.4 Range = 1 to 250

TABLE IV

Criteria for GTA Assignment

Criteria for GTA Assignment	No. of Depts.	Percent
Course enrollment needs	52	40.0%
GTA's major content area	25	19.2%
GTA's past teaching experience	13	10.0%
GTA's academic level	4	3.1%
GTA's seniority in dept.	0	0.0%
Other	8	6.2%
Combination of the above	28	21.5%
total	130*	100.0%

*one department did not respond to the question

TABLE V

Teaching Format

Percentage of GTAs per Dept.	Lecture only	Lecture/ Recitation	Recitation only
0%	110 (84.0%)	29 (22.1%)	80 (61.1%)
1 - 25%	13 (9.9%)	15 (11.5%)	11 (8.4%)
26 - 50%	2 (1.5%)	12 (9.2%)	9 (6.9%)
51 - 75%	0 (0.0%)	5 (3.8%)	7 (5.3%)
76 - 100%	6 (4.6%)	70 (53.4%)	24 (18.3%)
total	131 (100%)	131 (100%)	131 (100%)

TABLE VI

Amount of GTA Responsibility for classes

Percentage of GTAs per Dept.	Amount of Responsibility: None	Some	Majority	Total
0%	120 (92%)	63 (48%)	48 (37%)	99 (76%)
1 - 25%	5 (4%)	14 (11%)	10 (8%)	14 (11%)
26 - 50%	2 (2%)	20 (15%)	13 (10%)	4 (3%)
51 - 75%	1 (1%)	11 (8%)	10 (8%)	0 (0%)
76 - 100%	3 (2%)	23 (18%)	50 (38%)	14 (11%)
total	131 (100%)	131 (100%)	131 (100%)	131 (100%)

TABLE VII

Types of Training Programs:
Required or Optional

Type of Training Program	No. of Depts.	Percent
Course Orientation	123	93.9%
Dept. Course on Teaching Methods	66	50.4%
Other Dept. Course On Teaching Methods	37	28.2%
Staff Meetings	114	87.4%

TABLE VIII

Types of GTA Evaluation

Types of Evaluation Procedures		No. of Depts.	Percent
By Undergraduate Students	College?University Standard Rating Form	65	49.6%
	Departmental Standard Rating Form	63	48.1%
	Departmental NonStandard Rating Form	25	19.1%
By Faculty	Class Visitation	97	74.0%
	Appraisal Interviews	87	66.4%
	Standardized Faculty Rating Form	34	26.0%
	Review of Student Evaluations	106	80.9%
By GTAs	GTA Self-Evaluation	45	34.4%
	GTA Peer Evaluation	16	12.2%

TABLE IX

Amount of Prior Teaching Experience

Number of Years of Teaching Experience	Percentage of GTAs Per Department 0%	1 - 25%	26-- 50%	51 - 75%	76 - 100%
No Prior Experience	24 (18.3%)	28 (21.4%)	27 (20.6%)	18 (13.7%)	34 (26.0%)
Less than one year experience	42 (32.1%)	49 (37.4%)	24 (18.3%)	7 (5.3%)	9 (6.9%)
1 to 2 years	64 (48.9%)	45 (34.4%)	19 (14.5%)	1 (0.8%)	2 (1.5%)
2 to 3 years	84 (64.1%)	34 (26.0%)	7 (5.3%)	1 (0.8%)	5 (3.8%)
3 to 4 years	102 (77.9%)	27 (20.6%)	2 (1.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
4 to 5 years	111 (84.7%	16 (12.2%)	3 (2.3%)	1 (0.8%)	0 (0.0%)
5 Or more years	108 (82.4%)	22 (16.8%)	1 (0.8%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
total	131 (100%)	131 (100%)	131 (100%)	131 (100%)	131 (100%)

TABLE X

GTA Salaries

Amount of GTA Salaries	MA Level GTA		Ph.D. Level GTA	
	No. of Depts	Percent	No. of Depts.	Percent
less than $2500	12	9.5%	0	0.0%
$2501 - $2800	17	13.5%	2	4.7%
$2801 - $3100	21	16.7%	2	4.7%
$3101 - $3400	17	13.5%	7	16.3%
$3401 - $3700	22	17.5%	6	14.0%
$3701 - $4000	16	12.7%	6	14.0%
$4001 - $4300	7	5.6%	10	23.3%
$4301 or more	14	11.1%	10	23.3%
total	126*	100.0%	43**	100.0%

*Five departments dis not have MA level GTAs or did not report MA level GTA salaries

**88 departments did not have Ph.D. level GTAs or did not report Ph.D. level GTA salaries.

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